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# **PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

**Giles Mohan**

"People today have an urge - an impatient urge - to participate in the events and processes that shape their lives. And that impatience brings many dangers and opportunities" (UNDP, 1993: 1)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past twenty years a wide range of organisations, with very different ideological agendas, has started involving local people in their own development (Peet and Watts, 1996). This chapter begins by looking at different definitions of participatory development and goes on to examine through what sorts of organisations it is achieved. As there are a myriad possible approaches I have included case studies which demonstrate different facets of participation. This brings us onto a critique and an overview of where things might go in the future.

## **PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN THEORY**

The emergence of participatory development (PD) is tied into critiques of both theory and practice.

### The emergence of participation

According to the strongest advocates of PD, 'normal' development is characterised by biases which are disempowering (Peet and Watts, 1996: 20-25). These biases are Eurocentrism, positivism, and top-downism (Escobar, 1995; Chambers, 1997). The overarching tendency is to equate development with 'modernity' which means the modernity as achieved by 'western' societies (Schuurman, 1993). Hence, development meant copying these 'advanced' countries

through rational planning by experts. Clearly, the flipside is that 'non-expert', local people were sidelined and their only role was as the objects of grandiose, national schemes.

As it became apparent that development programmes had yielded limited benefits, the volume of criticism grew. In the 1970s, radicals (Freire, 1970) advocated Participatory Action Research which created appropriate learning environments for people to express their needs and achieve development. Even mainstream organisations like the World Bank argued for Basic Needs and women-centred approaches which targeted marginalised groups. Added to this were academics, most notably Robert Chambers (1983), who argued that 'putting the last first' was the only way to achieve rural development. Since then the acceptance of participation has become widespread.

### Contested definitions

In order to judge how successful a PD programme is you must be clear what others mean by 'participation' as well as having a personal conception of what you understand by it. This means that there are no universal definitions of PD. What we see are different ideologies which reflect the broader goals that participation might achieve. If people participate, what are they aiming to gain by participating? One view is *instrumental* whereby participation increases the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of 'formal' development programmes (Mayo and Craig, 1995). The broad goals of development are valid, but the institutional practices are not working, but can be improved by direct involvement of the beneficiaries. An example is the Women in Development (WID) initiatives of the 1970s aimed at incorporating women into the planning process (Moser, 1989). Others see participation as part of a more *transformative* agenda (Esteva and Prakash, 1998) which might be anti-developmental. That is, 'development' itself is flawed and only by valorising other, non-hegemonic voices can meaningful social change occur. For example,

Esteva and Prakash (1998) see the Zapatistas of Mexico as an anti-developmental movement *par excellence*. Despite these differences, there has been a growing acceptance regarding the importance of local involvement. At the root of this 'consensus' is the belief in not relying on the state - *the* prime institution of modernity - for development. So, it might not be coincidental that PD gained popularity around the same time as the neo-liberal counter-revolution of the early 1980s with its discourse of self-help and individualism (Toye, 1987).

While I want to avoid cementing one definition of PD, it will be useful to look at some of the major approaches. The German agency, GTZ, defined participation as "co-determination and power sharing throughout the...programme cycle" (1991: 5, cited in Nelson and Wright, 1995: 4). Here, participation involves external and local agencies working together on a project basis; the implication being that the project was reasonably circumscribed. The World Bank soon established a Learning Group on Participation and in the mid-1990s began a series of Participatory Poverty Assessments (Narayan et al, 2000). For them, participation involved stakeholders who "influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them" (World Bank, 1994: 6 cited in Nelson and Wright: 1995: 5). Such a recognition fed into the 'good governance' agenda which sought to share responsibility for project implementation compared to the 1980s where aid-receiving countries had their policies driven entirely by the donors (Mohan et al, 2000).

These conceptualisations, while useful, are still rather general. Rahnema (1992) suggests that PD involves the following core elements:

- *cognitive* in order to generate a "different mode of understanding the realities to be addressed" (ibid.:121)

- *political* in "empowering the voiceless" (ibid.: 121)
- *instrumental* in order to "propose new alternatives" (ibid.: 121)

In a similar vein, the United Nations Development Programme (1993) sub-divided participation into four key forms - household, economic, social-cultural and political - and stressed that all forms overlap and interact. Not surprisingly for a major development agency, and in contrast to Rahnema, the UNDP is more prescriptive about what each form of participation entails. In particular, the emphasis on economic participation and increasing purchasing power is at odds with those who see participation as a post-development, anti-capitalist initiative involving new forms of production and exchange.

### Powerful processes

It needs emphasising that which ever definition we use, the process of PD is fundamentally about power (see Mayo and Craig, 1995: 5-6 and Nelson and Wright, 1995: 7-11). Participation involves political struggle whereby the powerful fight to retain their privileges. Even many supposedly pro-participation Development Agencies are incredibly powerful and show a marked reluctance to release control. Participation is a conflictual and, sometimes, violent process whereby the less powerful must struggle for increased control over their lives.

## **PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE**

In this section I discuss the scale at which PD occurs, the institutional arrangements it involves, and the processes through which it attempts to change power relations.

### Grassroots civil society

In rejecting the statism and top-downism of 'normal' development, the focus for PD has become

the local or grassroots level (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). This permits a plurality of developmental goals to be realised as well as giving the community the self-determination it needs. Given that the state was seen as the main impediment to participation, much of PD is organised through civil society (Hyden, 1997). If state structures are inflexible, bureaucratic, urban-biased and unaccountable, then civil society organisations are believed to be smaller, more accountable, locally-aware and more hands-on. Although civil society has multiple meanings (Hyden, 1997), in a developmental context it has largely been interpreted as the realm of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Mayo and Craig, 1995; McIlwaine, 1998). NGOs are incredibly diverse, with many of the southern-based ones relying on funding and institutional support from northern partners.

#### New knowledges

As we saw earlier, PD reverses the biases which have marginalised and alienated the poor. As Rahnema (1992) pointed out one important step concerns cognition and knowledge generation. In contrast to the expert knowledges of normal development, PD stresses the necessity of local knowledges. The expert systems of modernity relied upon scientific approaches where planners worked from normative social models so that the recipients of development were treated as passive or, more often, conservative and obstructive. PD reverses this. The research methods for doing this were inspired by Paulo Freire and have grown into a veritable industry (see Chambers, 1997: 106-13), but all centre upon trying to see the world from the point of view of those directly affected by the developmental intervention.

The most widely used methodology is Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). As Chambers (1997: 103) explains:

The essence of PRA is change and reversals - of role, behaviour, relationship and learning. Outsiders do not dominate and lecture; they facilitate, sit down, listen and learn. Outsiders do not transfer technology; they share methods which local people can use for their own appraisal, analysis, planning, action, monitoring and evaluation. Outsiders do not impose their reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own

PRA relies on many visual and oral techniques for generating knowledge because it is felt that the medium of written language is prejudicial to free expression. Methods such as mapping, ranking of preferences and oral histories are all part of the PRA toolkit. So, PD seeks out the diversity which allows the differences between people and between communities to be realised rather than treating everybody as uniform objects of development.

### **PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION**

So far I have outlined the theory of PD, but what happens when it is practised in the 'real' world?

The three case studies in this section demonstrate different facets of PD, including the possible dangers associated with participation.

#### Case I - participation for developmental efficiency

This study is based on the work of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), AKRSP(I), and shows how participation can be used to 'smooth' the implementation of a pre-determined project.

The approach discussed by Shah (1997) relates to 'consensus-building'. The role of participatory approaches was to "to find a meeting ground to negotiate terms of collaboration" (ibid.: 75). For Shah, the development agency must be flexible "not in its basic objectives, but in

its systems and procedures” (ibid.: 75) so the goals are circumscribed from the outset. The example relates to a dam scheme and PRA was used to get an understanding of the villagers’ water resources, needs and storage solutions. Previously the state had provided the dams for free, but the overall management was growing problematic as the water table was lowering. AKRSP(I) became involved and introduced a contribution scheme for farmers. The farmers were not given an option in this regard, but the participatory exercise helped reach mutually agreeable solutions. As Shah (ibid.: 77) concludes “What has this exercise achieved? Certainly not true empowerment where villagers decide and prioritise development proposals with minimal external support and facilitation”. Shah suggests that while deep participation might be desirable it is rarely viable where external agents are time-bound and accountable to funders further up the line. But that is not to say they are dictatorial and that the lack of true empowerment detracts from very real benefits.

#### Case II - participation for more open-ended development

This study concerns Village AiD, a small UK-based NGO, which works in West Africa. They have been trying to promote deeper participation which leaves the development trajectories more open-ended.

Village AiD are aware that many 'participatory' programmes are like the one in the previous case. The danger as far as Village AiD are concerned is “that a particular project undertaken in the past had not been a high priority for the village, but was undertaken at the suggestion of an NGO” (Village AiD, 1996: 7). Instead, they seek to develop a situation where "village communities set the agenda and outside agencies become responsive....this whole capacity building process is about confidence in the village in order to say 'No' to organisations that do



not meet the village's requirements' (Village AiD, 1996: 8 & 14). This process begins by acknowledging and working with traditional facilitators rather than using a rigid PRA framework "which is based upon values, communication capacities and processes...and agendas of outsiders" (Village AiD, 1998: 11). Village AiD is doing this through a programme called *Arizama* which is a Dagbani word roughly translating as 'dialogue'. This involves the identification, adoption and adaptation (if necessary) of indigenous communication methods, such as dance, song and story-telling.

### Case III - participation for global social change

This study of the Zapatistas demonstrates a form of participatory politics which is radical, non-parochial and could contribute to transformation at the national and global scales.

The Zapatistas are a political movement in Southern Mexico which emerged in 1994 and are led by the mysterious Subcomandante Marcos. The Zapatistas spread their message around the world via the Internet and were picked up by activist-academics as a 'post-modern' social movement (Burbach, 1996). The Zapatistas call for ethnic recognition, economic reform, and political participation, but their message transcends the locale. Subcomandante Marcos is seen to embody the essence of global civil society. In response to the question 'who is he?' the reply came "Marcos is every untolerated, oppressed, exploited minority that is beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen" (Autonomedia, 1994: 313). The rallying call is that diverse groups are exploited along different lines and this will form the basis of political change through coalitions. Esteva and Prakash (1998: 6) describe this form of participatory politics as "*the* super-grassroots movement that is a match for the global forces from which the oppressed seek their liberation" (emphasis in original). Clearly, the agenda is simultaneously local,

national and global.

## **THE PROBLEMS OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

Having looked at these case studies it will be worth drawing together some of the major problems that have emerged with PD.

First, is tokenism. As PD has become popular, some agencies use the rhetoric of participation with only limited empowerment. These organisations probably do this in order to gain funding or legitimacy. Although PRA started as a bold challenge to expert élitism it has become so routinised that many agencies use it uncritically and treat it as a 'rubber stamp' to prove their participatory credentials (Richards, 1995; Mohan, 1999). As the Village AiD study showed, some NGOs have grown sceptical about the abuse of PRA as it still relies on notions of cognition (e.g. voting) which are non-local (Goebel, 1998; Robinson-Pant, 1995).

Second, is much PD has treated communities as socially homogenous although more sensitive PRA picks up on heterogeneity. In this regard, gender differences at the household and community level have become key factors (Mosse, 1994; Guijt and Shah, 1998). While community empowerment might be an improvement on unresponsive bureaucracies, there have been cases where support for 'the community' has meant that funding and authority is passed to élités so that the most marginalised are further sidelined.

Third, at an organisational level, the emphasis on civil society can create competition between local organisations. As greater quantities of aid are channelled through such organisations it is the better organised, more acceptable or least scrupulous which capture the resources. The result

can be that weaker organisations are further undermined as the developmental success stories blossom into large, semi-commercial outfits. This can also mean that local government is bypassed as donors focus their attentions at building the capacity of NGOs. Allied to this, is that many partnerships between northern and southern NGOs are heavily loaded in favour of the former. Not only does the northern NGO usually control the bulk of finances, but it often retains *de facto* veto power over the southern counterpart. So financially, intellectually and politically many partnerships are anything but participatory with the southern NGO acting simply as a delivery mechanism for a pre-determined development agenda.

The fourth, and final, problem is broader and relates to the causes of underdevelopment. PD seeks to give local people control, but many processes affecting their (or our own) lives are often not readily tackled at the local level. For example, it is very hard for a small co-operative in rural Africa to change the rules governing international trade when the World Trade Organisation is dominated by the developed economies. Robert Chambers (1997), while aware of this, takes a rather liberal (and optimistic) view that once organisations see the value of participation it will be like a 'benign virus' and spread through them. Some organisations can appear participatory, but are as exclusionary as the agents of normal development that Chambers derides. Therefore, the emphasis on grassroots civil society can leave important structures untouched and do nothing to strengthen states and make them more effective and accountable to their citizens.

## **THE FUTURE OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

What becomes apparent is that while PD has brought very real benefits to some local communities the concept has also been abused and does little to address extra-local processes.

As more development agencies realise that development will involve broader questions of citizenship, sovereignty, and globalisation, the focus of some has changed. A growing number are seeking to build up the capacity of the state rather than by-passing it in their eagerness to empower civil society. This involves state-society 'synergy' (Evans, 1997; Ostrom, 1996) whereby partnerships aim to produce more lasting development and bolster citizenship in the process. In doing this, Fowler (1998) urges NGOs to form more genuine partnerships than currently exist where, as we have seen, the northern partner tends to have disproportionate influence.

Other NGOs have moved, or expanded, into advocacy and lobbying. The Jubilee 2000 Coalition for debt relief is a case in point. The belief is that 'local' problems have global causes so that the most useful thing that a relatively powerful, non-local organisation can do is use its political weight to raise awareness and campaign for reform of the institutions of global governance. This sees ever more complex networks of alliances between NGOs which presents new forms of participation which are not rooted in place, but stretched across space where 'community' may only exist in a 'virtual' sense. In all these cases the challenges for participatory development multiply.

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